

Testimony before the Appropriations Committee

February 23, 2017

Mandy Sullivan, LPC, Middletown, CT

Good Afternoon Senator Gerratana, Representative Dillon, Senator Somer, Senator Osten, Senator Formica, Representative Walker and members of the Appropriations Committee. I am Jane Hylan, Director of School Based Health for the Community Health Center, Incorporated headquartered in Middletown. I will be reading testimony for a member of my staff who is needed back at the SBHC where she practices.

I am Mandy Sullivan, a behavioral health clinician working with the elementary population at one of the School Based Health Centers in the Middletown, CT. For confidentiality purposes, I prefer to refrain from identifying my specific school location. I am here to testify on Act HB 7027, An act concerning the State Budget for the Biennium ending June 30, 2019. I would like to share a brief story to show just how critical SBHC's are in helping students and families within our schools.

I recently began working with a 10 year old, who I will call "Sam" to protect her identity. In our second session together, Sam disclosed she was suicidal. She thought about taking her life every day for the last several months and never told anyone before. Sam also discussed her very specific plan with intent to take her life, stating she attempted two days prior to meeting with me however did not follow through at that time but planned on attempting again "sometime soon". During this time, Sam also disclosed for the first time, she was having both auditory and visual hallucinations of what she described as a female, her age, which at times would encourage her to harm herself. Suicide notes were also recently found in her room, along with several similar messages written on school papers that were stuffed in her locker, found after her disclosure.

As you can imagine, both Sam and her parents were scared, confused and unsure of what to do, who to seek help from and next steps, not to mention how to process their feelings around all this new information.

Due to the safety concerns and significant emotional pain Sam was experiencing, she was hospitalized for two full weeks where she could be observed and further assessed. She was started on medication to target symptoms of mood dysregulation and psychosis, along with a very intense, high level of care discharge plan- all put in place because she found comfort in our SBHC and with me. It was this comfort that allowed her to finally release what she had been keeping in for months. I was able to provide a thorough risk assessment and take the steps to ensure her safety and offer support to her parents, in which I continue to do. Although there were many other adults available to Sam, she turned to the SBHC. Having a skilled professional available to listen, ask the right questions and provide guidance she was so desperate for. She is now getting the help and support she needs. The SBHC where I work is very respected and appreciated, has been servicing children and their families for close to 25 years. I have been there for the past 6 years and very involved. Sam stated "I knew you would be able to help me and know what to do". Sam expressed feeling worried if she told her parents or any family members or friends, "they would judge me and say I'm crazy."

Sam returned to school just a few days ago, greeted by the open arms of her peers, teachers and other school staff. She is very strong academically, a straight A student and has positive peer relationships. She has never exhibited any behavioral disturbances within the school setting. Since her return, she has presented more relaxed, stable mood and safe, denying any hallucinations or desire to harm self, able to focus on academics and expressed her desire to get herself healthy, thanking me for listening to her and taking action to "keep me alive".

This is just one of many stories that show how our SBHC's are able to intervene and help children and families at times of tremendous struggle and uncertainty, helping provide support and guidance towards a more stable and healthy life within their home, school, and social settings. Often times, the clinicians working in our SBHC's, have the unique opportunity to be the first line of intervention in helping these students and their families. As in my story, I was the first person this student ever disclosed this information to and sought help from. Although very disturbing, I think about how the ending of my story could have been very different, very sad, very tragic had the SBHC not been available to this child and her family. My story also reminds us that it is not always the students who are exhibiting behavioral/emotional

disturbances that are in need of our support, also many students who present as well adjusted, stable and academically strong also can experience significant struggles. Our stories, time and time again, strengthen appreciation for our SBHC's knowing there is a place and experienced skilled clinicians, students and their families can come to for help when they don't know where else to turn. Our SBHC's operate from a very unique perspective, offering on the spot access, support to the school staff while providing all the services, care and adherence to confidentiality as any other outpatient clinic. SBHC's alleviate barriers of transportation and schedule conflicts to ensure consistent treatment which leads to improved mental health and school attendance and participation.

Please maintain funding to School Based Health Centers in our state so that young people can continue to thrive and stay in school and their families can continue to have an avenue to work towards promoting healthy parent child and family relationships. Sam and others like her are relying on us!